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UNCLAS BELGRADE 000633

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPT FOR EUR/SCE (P. PETERSON)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SERBIA LARGELY IGNORES 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF MILOSEVIC'S
GAZIMESTAN SPEECH

Summary

1. (SBU) The twentieth anniversary of Slobodan Milosevic's infamous speech at Gazimestan on the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo passed with little notice in Serbia, generating only a handful of press stories and one passing mention by President Tadic. Serbia's leaders appear to have missed a valuable opportunity to use the anniversary as a chance to spur public dialogue and reflection on the price the country continues to pay for Milosevic's disastrous destruction of Yugoslavia. End Summary.

Rally of a Million Serbs

2. (U) June 28, 2009, marked the twentieth anniversary of former Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic's infamous speech at the site of the Battle of Kosovo. Speaking on St. Vitus' Day (Vidovdan) to a crowd estimated at over a million Serbs, Milosevic declared himself their undisputed leader and promised the restoration of Serbian identity and national pride. He referred to the possibility of "armed battles," generating cries of "Kosovo is Serbia" from the crowd. Historians and analysts see that day as the beginning not only of the Milosevic era but also as the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Minimal Press Coverage

3. (U) Despite the historical significance of the speech, the twentieth anniversary received little attention in the Serbian media. Most media noted only that Gazimestan, once a symbol of national unity, was now under heavy KFOR protection. Some Belgrade press reported that the local Kosovo Serbs remember the Vidovdan of 1989 with melancholy, as their high hopes for the future had been dashed.

4. (U) Only two weekly news magazines highlighted the anniversary in their June 25 editions. Liberal weekly 'Vreme' reprinted the text of Milosevic's speech and invited readers to respond to a series of related questions, promising to run the responses in a future edition. Conservative weekly 'NIN' carried an editorial lamenting the Serbian public's feeling of "resignation" on the anniversary and criticizing the DS-led government. It also carried an interview with Milosevic-era Foreign Minister Vladislav Jovanovic and an article on the rally entitled "Serbia's Awakening or Manipulation with History," complaining that two lines in Milosevic's speech have caused many to blame Serbia for the break-up of Yugoslavia ("Six centuries later, now, we are being again engaged in battles and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet").

Tadic Condemns Consequences of Speech

15. (U) In an interview published in the June 28 edition of daily 'Vecernje Novosti,' President Boris Tadic emphasized that leaders must be conscious of the "consequences of our words and actions." In response to a question about why he would not attend this year's gathering, Tadic said "Nobody can take Vidovdan from Serbia and from Serbs. But Serbia should never again celebrate like it did in 1989, after which, due to erroneous and irresponsible policy, it was followed by blockages, sanctions, wars, death, robbery of citizens and their poverty, and on top of it all, we were bombed, and the same Kosovo which they spoke about so much became a protectorate."

Comment

16. (SBU) The twentieth anniversary of Milosevic's infamous Gazimestan speech could have been a useful opportunity for Serbian leaders to encourage the public to reflect on the events of the 1990s and the consequences of Milosevic's disastrous campaign to create a "Greater Serbia," which resulted in the deaths of close to a quarter of a million on the territory of former Yugoslavia and millions of displaced persons and refugees. Tadic's brief reference to the event in a newspaper interview, while constructive, is unlikely to spur the kind of self-reflection that Serbia so desperately needs. End

Comment.

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